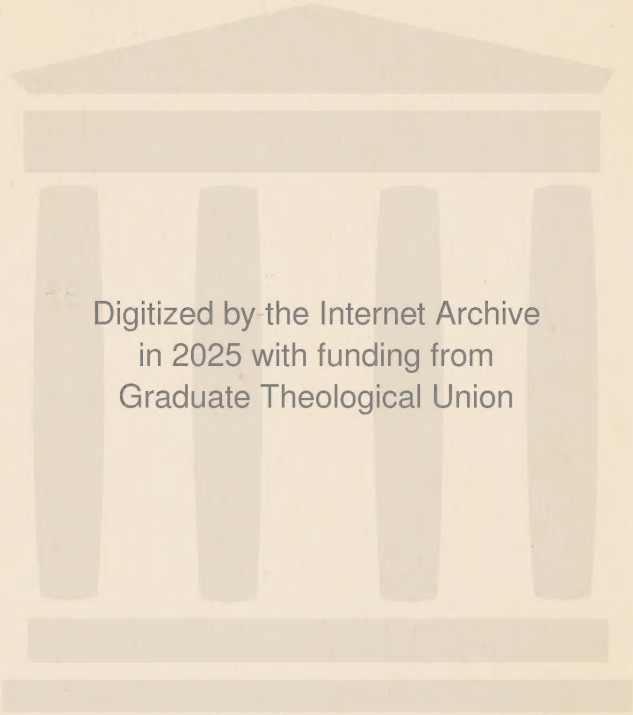
The Need of Deeper Spiritual Life

WRITTEN FOR THE

PACIFIC COAST UNITARIAN CONFERENCE

1892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THE NEED OF DEEPER SPIRITUAL LIFE.

[Written for the Pacific Coast Unitarian Conference, 1892.]

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Do we not all feel this to be a deep personal need, and do not our consciences often demand an answer to the questions : Why, as Christians, the promises made by our Master are not more perfectly fulfilled to us, and why, in spite of many prayers and struggles, we are still so unlike Him in spirit and in life? When bereaved, we do not receive the comfort promised to those that mourn ; when tempted, no way of escape is opened before us, and His peace and joy are but transient guests in our hearts.

And are we not appalled at the shallowness of our Christian experience, and poverty of soul, when trying to comfort some saddened heart, or to save some soul fighting with fierce temptation, and do we not mistrust that we have been offering worship to an unknown god, when they cry to us in the words of Martineau: "Where, then, is *your* God ? You say He is everywhere ; then show me anywhere *you* have met Him. You declare Him everlasting, then tell me of any moment He has been with you. You believe Him ready to succor those that are tempted, and to lift those that are bowed down, then in

what hour did you subside into His calm grace ; in what sorrow lose yourself in His more exceeding joy ?" Happy are they who in such hours can say, with a rush of tender, loving feeling, "I know in whom I have believed."

We cannot obey the commandment to love God with all our heart and soul and mind, unless we know Him.

We can believe that He is, and can sing praises, and offer prayers, and spend time and strength in service for Him, but the praise will not be the spontaneous outpouring of a worshiping, adoring soul, our hearts will be far from Him, even while we are praying with our lips, and it will not be love service we render, unless we are learning to know Him as He manifests Himself in humanity,—in the lowest as well as the highest, in the unlovely as well as the lovely, "for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen ?" and in the wonders and beauties of Nature, who is ever ready to reveal her hidden secrets to one who seeks reverently and patiently to find the clew ; and in the experiences of joy and sorrow, He in His love and Fatherly goodness, sends to us daily to bless our lives, and purify them from dross and stain, until at last "we live and move and have our being in Him."

This attitude brings us into close communion with Him ; His will becomes ours, and, with joyful acquies-

cence, we seek that it may be done in every detail of our lives. We turn to Him for strength and comfort, for counsel and guidance. The old independent self-life is left behind, and we enter into a blessed realization of the life that is hid in God.

With one hand thus placed in that of the source of all our life, receiving a constant supply for the needs of body as well as of soul, we reach out the other in loving helpfulness to the weak and suffering ones about us, and endeavor to share with them the knowledge that has so blessed us. Now we are no longer helpless and silent ; out of the heart at last the mouth speaketh, and we are able to comfort others with the comfort wherewith we ourselves have been comforted.

Our own inner life is quickened and deepened by thus giving out continually ; for, even as a pool of water becomes stagnant and unhealthy, no matter how pure the source is from which it is supplied, unless it has some outlet, so it is with our lives, unless we are constantly giving out what we receive.

Was not this attitude toward God and man the secret of Christ's beautiful, holy life, and of all the lives we cherish and revere in the past, which, whether pagan or Christian, worshipped and communed with God, if the divine commandment was obeyed which is written in the hearts of all men alike, to worship the highest they know ?

And is it not the secret also of the good and noble who are making life's journey with us to-day? It is because we have been satisfied to accept certain beliefs *about* our God, and have not worshipped Him thus in spirit and in truth, that we have had so little personal knowledge *of* Him.

We long for peace, gentleness, goodness, faith, and meekness, and strive earnestly to win them for ourselves, forgetting that they are the fruits of the spirit, the natural results of the unfolding of the Divine within us.

We must first be rooted and grounded before we can bear fruit.

Character is a growth from within, and these graces cannot be assumed from without.

Let us then welcome the great teachers our wise and loving Father sends us. Tribulation which worketh patience, patience which worketh experience, experience which worketh hope; and say to each in turn, "I will not let thee go except thou bless me." The silent influence we have it in our power to exert is unbounded, and those who are thus growing, step by step, into the full stature of perfect manhood and womanhood, and are striving daily to walk with God, radiate a heavenly atmosphere wherever they go, and their faces, no matter how plain-featured, have what an old negress once described

as a "Glory to God" expression, which draws all hearts towards them.

The atheist denies, and the agnostic tells us we cannot know, but these "Children of light" believe that although they now know only in part they shall sometime know, even as they are known, and having—

"Souls that are gentle and still,"

already they

"Hear the first echo of this
Far-off infinite bliss."

It is not only silently their influence is exerted upon others, for they are ever ready also to utter the spoken word of help and inspiration, and are so freed from self as to have overcome the strange reticence which keeps so many of us silent in regard to our inner life, even to our nearest and dearest, and hinders us from sharing with them and others the joy and light we have received from God, and causes us to miss many opportunities of helpfulness which lie in our path.

This cannot be right ; for are we not placed in families as fathers, mothers, brothers and sisters ; and are we not friends in order that we may develop the best in one another, not only by giving our highest intellectual thought, our heart's devotion and tenderness, but also the word and thought which quicken and nourish the soul ?

We did not come to our place by accident, and God needs you and me, as co-workers with Him, to prepare the way for the coming of His Kingdom in the hearts of those whose lives touch ours.

If we remain silent and self-centered, we ourselves shall suffer in character, for we cannot hope to escape the penalty which must inevitably follow these sins of omission. This is one great cause of the sad estrangement which often occurs between parent and child when the latter has reached maturity.

The child, through indifference or neglect on the part of the parent, has been forced to seek its soul-culture and nourishment from other sources, and at length either drifts into atheism or finds after many years of soul-darkness and misery, too terrible to be expressed in words, the Heavenly Father for whom it has been seeking from childhood.

But the parent and child are strangers in spirit to one another ; they have drifted widely apart and the loss is irreparable to each.

Words spoken from deep soul experiences never fail to reach some one in need. Is it not our privilege as well as our duty thus to bear witness ?

Many are listening for such words from us who bear the sacred name of Christian. Such are the weak and erring who would often quickly respond if, guided by

the Holy Spirit, not daring to speak our own words or to minister to the sin-sick souls in our own strength, we told them of God's forgiveness and love instead of harshly judging and condemning them ; men and women who are seemingly absorbed in the pleasures of this world, and who boast that they make no professions of Christianity, and yet who are haunted when alone by the thought of the higher life they know they might have led, of the noble, useful work they might have done, and who are so many times heavy-hearted and despairing, when we consider them callous and worldly ; young men and women just leaving the beautiful dream-world in which they have been living, and facing for the first time the stern realities of life and its many problems, which meet them, one by one, to be solved. Many of these are secretly burdened by some doubt of the creed they have been trained to accept as infallible, and which larger experience and knowledge have caused them to outgrow, and which they can no longer accept without becoming intellectually dishonest, and are turning at this crisis of their lives to us of the more liberal faith ; watching us with earnest, critical eyes to see if, with the wider intellectual outlook, they will also receive from us the bread and water of life, for which their souls are hungering and thirsting.

In spite of the seeming indifference in regard to relig-

ion, which often shocks and pains us, never before has there been a more earnest, sincere search for truth than now, and this spirit of investigation and inquiry is increasing every day.

The disquiet and unrest which such a breaking away from old associations and beliefs causes, is one reason why so many become ardent believers in Christian Science, Theosophy and other faiths, which claim to give a satisfactory answer to the old cry of the soul, "What is Truth?" and from many of which we may indeed learn beautiful, inspiring truths, but which, if followed blindly, without reason and judgment to guide, will lead us into dangerous extremes.

The child who has found its Father's house, and lives there in obedience and love and in perfect harmony with His laws and will, going out from thence to bless and help others who have not yet found their way home, and striving to make the straight and narrow path which leads there a little brighter, a little easier for them, and is so ready and eager only to do as he is bidden, that he does not in self-will run ahead of orders, or become so interested and absorbed in his errand, that he forgets the One for whose glory he is working ; and who, when wearied in mind and body, returns again to have his life forces renewed, will surely know what it means, in a physical

as well as spiritual sense, to have his strength always sufficient for his day's need.

This is the way Christ lived, and kept that perfect balance between mind, soul and body which means health, while under daily pressure of exhausting cares and burdens, which, as burden bearer of the world, were laid upon him ; and if Christian Science or the other beliefs are stepping-stones on which humanity may rise into this divine way of living, time will sift the truth of their teachings from the error, and prove conclusively whether their claim is true or false.

If, while awaiting this judgment, those who are ailing and weak in body would accept the simple, indisputable truth that the wonderful thought-life going on silently within us constantly, has a power for good or ill over our health, which is incalculable in its influence, and that until the wrong habit of thought is changed, it will inevitably express itself outwardly on the body, in the form of weakness or disease, and would resolve to live in their outward and inward life, in obedience to Nature's laws, which are God's, they would certainly be blessed in body as well as in spirit. What does righteousness mean but right-being, right-thinking, right-living? And can we hope to be filled with vitality and vigor when our thoughts are vain and idle, selfish or gross? We can,

under such conditions, know neither the blessings of health nor of goodness.

God is the source of all life, and we must place ourselves in an attitude to receive it from Him, and open every avenue of our being to its incoming before we can have it abundantly.

Every thought will then be brought into captivity. We shall no longer be bowed down by care and worry, for we shall trust, and trust and worry cannot live in the same heart; and we shall not waste our strength in endeavoring to gain control over the evil within us, only to have it break out again when we are off guard, but shall be able to *conquer* it, and drive it out so completely that our faults will drop away from us like dead leaves from trees in autumn, and the terrible struggle which has been waging between the good and the evil will cease, and we shall be at peace, and shall feel that we have already reached the heavenly place "where the inhabitants shall not say I am sick, and where the people that dwell therein shall have been forgiven their iniquity."

The Christian life is often spoken of as a warfare, but oh! Christ's yoke is easy, and His burden is light to those who thus follow closely in His footprints.

Is the ideal too high? Are the conditions of loving obedience, consecration of will, surrender of self, which the entering into this higher life entails, too difficult?

The highest is none too high, and sooner or later these conditions must be fulfilled. We are apt to think that this ideal cannot be realized in this life, and to postpone fulfilling these conditions until we are old. But why must we wander in the wilderness of self-will and disobedience through many weary years, only to retrace our steps at last in sorrow and repentance, to learn life's unheeded lessons, when we might at any moment enter the promised land?

Why must we waste one life in learning how to live? We enter the life beyond in the same condition, spiritually, as we leave this life. Let then the thought of those "we have loved long since and lost awhile," who, on the other side, are growing into the perfect likeness of God, inspire us to seek more earnestly that His Kingdom may come, and His will be done in us, even as it is in Heaven, so that we, who are receiving our training on this side, may be ready to join them when we, too, are summoned.

As Unitarians we have tidings of great joy to proclaim to the world, especially to those who have thus far held the belief that Christ was in some mysterious, contradictory way, a man, and yet at the same time, God, whom it seemed hopeless to try to be like, on account of his double character; to them the revelations of the great truths come with unspeakable comfort, that we also are the children of God, with the germ of the Divine life

within us, that the difference is of degree, and not of kind, that it lies within our power to realize this ideal of a Christlike character and life.

Our responsibility is great, and if, as a church, we are to meet the needs of those who are coming to us for new life and light, and are not to be disobedient to the heavenly vision given us of the coming time when "The Fatherhood of God" and "The Brotherhood of Man" will be the all-sufficient creed in every church, in every land, we, as *individual* Unitarians, must each and all recognize our "high calling of God," and exemplify in our daily lives, at home and abroad, in word, and thought, and deed, the spirit of our Master, our Great Example. As Dean Stanley says :

"Be as liberal, be as courageous as you will, but be religious. Because you are liberal, be devout. Because you are free, be pure. Because you are bold, cast away the works of darkness. Because you are the children of light, be humble, and considerate, and forbearing. Because you are charged with hopes as grand as were ever committed to any church of any generation or of any country."